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THE MODALITY OF NECESSITY: ON CLOVER'S RIOT. STRIKE. RIOT

LEXICON, NONPOLITICS CAPITALISM, CRISES, MARXISM, RIOT, STRIKE

The reference in the title *Riot. Strike. Riot* will be abundantly clear to readers of Marx. It is reference to the formulas that open volume one of *Capital*, C-M-C and more importantly M-C-M' or Money. Commodity. Money Prime. It is the latter which provides the book's structuring formulation, even if it is more interested in Volume Three than One, in value theory, specifically the tendency of the rate of profit to fall as the latter has become the general ether from which to grab the present in the works of *Endnotes* and *Theorie Communiste*.

Which might actually be my first critical remark. There is much work to be done, theoretical and polemical, when it comes to the topic of riots, the very word invites moralism and myriad illusions about a kinder gentler form of political struggle (these debates are often repeated in the bad infinity of social media every time there is rioting and looting), and as much as the book address these moralisms and illusions, and does so deftly, it remains oddly positioned between a book written for a general "left," the general audience of Verso, and a smaller crowd in conversation with the recent work in what is sometimes called "communization theory" and sometimes called ultra-left. Alongside this esoteric and exoteric divide there is a divide between historical theory and political polemic. It sometimes reads like *Capital* of the age of riots and sometimes like its *Communist Manifesto*. This is admittedly the worse sort of criticism, the one based on another imagined book, but in reading it I found myself wishing Clover had written something longer, a monumental history and theory of the riot that would be able to shut down all moralism of the right, all of those who see the riot as some kind of violent interruption of the peace of everyday life. Of course that is a fantasy, because as Clover points out the moralizing and concern trolling is based less on a theoretical argument than a particular experience, "life determines consciousness" after all. "This insistence on the violence of the riot effectively obscures the daily, systematic, and ambient violence that stalks daily life for much of the world. The vision of a generally pacific sociality that only in exception breaks forth into violence is an imaginary accessible only to some. For others—most—social violence is the norm. The rhetoric of the violent riot becomes a device of exclusion, aimed not so much against "violence" but against specific social groups." More on the excluded groups in a bit, but first on the brevity of the formula that structures the book.

The sequence Riot. Strike. Riot Prime, or R-S-R', is fairly schematic breakdown of recent history in which an age of riots gives way

to the age of strikes only to be followed by a second, expanded age of riots. "In the first instance, riot is the setting of prices for market goods, while strike is the setting of prices for labor power." The first age of riots corresponded to the initial creation of the capitalist market, commodity exchange as the basis for the acquisition of needs, its figure was that of the food riot. This is followed by the factory and the age of the strike, which has to be historicized as a moment in anti-capitalist action rather than metonymically standing in for the whole. "In the first instance, riot is the setting of prices for market goods, while strike is the setting of prices for labor power." The age of strikes are in turn followed by riot prime, which is also a struggle within the sphere of circulation, but with some fundamental differences. It is no longer a struggle over the constitution of capital itself, as markets replace commons and production for use, but over a capital forced to extract whatever revenue it can from the field of circulation. Riots are positioned at the end points of capital, at circulation but also at its historical end and beginning. The cycle riot-strike-riot, is also circulation-production-circulation, but neither of these a circle that returns to its beginning. Circulation is less about food, about commodity prices, then the way in which all of space and life has becoming internal to capital's increasingly desperate search for revenue. "Capital has shifted its hopes for profit into the space of circulation, and thus shifted its vulnerability there."

Riot prime has to be understood as a consequence of two interlocking economic tendencies, tendencies elaborated by Marx but given a revival in the recent works referenced above, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and the production of surplus populations. Strikes were battles over both the price of labor and a share of the social surplus, and are thus relative to a period, the long twentieth century in which there was such a surplus. The falling rate of profit has not only displaced many from factories, it has entirely changed the terrain of struggle. As Clover writes, "As these surpluses melt away and increasing portions of the population are rendered surplus to the economy in turn, the state turns more and more to coercion as a management style: the social wage of the Keynesian compromise is withdrawn in favor of police occupation of excluded communities." These excluded communities are only partially or paradoxically so, excluded from work they still need commodities in order to survive. As Etienne Balibar writes, "At the moment at which humankind becomes economically and, to some extent, culturally "united," it is violently divided "biopolitically." Clover does not argue, as Zizek and others have, thankfully that their inclusion is an inclusion into the ideology of consumerism.

These exclusions follow the lines of race, or as Clover cites Stuart Hall, "race...is the modality in which class is lived." The excluded populations are also racialized. If the first riot found its emblematic expression in the food riot, riot prime is the race riot. This also shapes, and is shaped by the state's turn to security. As Clover argues the earlier riots were first economic and then political, once some started struggling for bread there was always someone to read the riot act; riots today, riot prime, are first political and then economic, they begin with the police and then looting follows. "For riot, the economy is near, the state far. For *riot prime* the economy is far, the state near. Either way it is the marketplace and the street."

This brings me to my first, and only question, it is a question of articulation, of the necessity of the riot form and the contingency of its manifestation. I do not dispute the book's central claim that we the era of strikes, at least in terms of their centrality and revolutionary potential, is over, and that new struggles are left to take a more diffuse form. I also think it is correct in seeing the racial nature of excluded populations. Asking if there can be capitalism without racism is a little like asking what would happen if dinosaurs still walked the Earth, it is possible but best filed under fantasy. The necessity of both the riots and their particular modality seems well argued.

What I am curious about is the intersection of these necessities, the necessity of capital, and the necessity of history including the history of race, and contingency. For example the contingency of the riots themselves. As we have seen repeatedly in the last several years, as much as the recent wave of riots, blockades, and other forms of struggle might be the products of the structural conditions of race and capital, but they still need a contingent event to set them off. These events generally take the form of a video or some other evidence of a shooting. While there may be nothing properly contingent about these events, they have become far to predictable, the when and where is entirely determined by who had a smartphone at the right place and time. That is one way in which riots are contingent, but the very intersection, or overdetermination, of state and marketplace also seems contingent, or at least is perceived to be so." The age of riots does not always hold them together. Many in OWS understood their opposition to the marketplace, but not the police, just as many in blacklivesmatter see their opposition to the police and not the marketplace. As Clover argues the riots are often double. In the age of riots one divides into two.

"The shape of the double riot is clear enough. One riot arises from youth discovering that the routes that once promised a minimally secure formal integration into the economy are now foreclosed. The other arises from racialized surplus populations and the violent state management thereof. The holders of empty promissory notes, and the holders of nothing at all."

The question is how does one make a politics out of this combination of necessity and contingency. Such a question is not new, it might be the question of revolutionary politics. The long wave of strikes had answers to this question, answers that took the form of the worker's movement, revolutionary unions, and so on. Clover has some suggestive remarks about the connection between riots and commons as reproducing the material conditions, suggestions that come from the Oakland Commune, but there is also the question of the ideological conditions as well. Like I said, I am not sure what sort of book this is ultimately, but perhaps we need a *Capital* and a *Manifesto* of this age of riots.

taken from Unemployed Negativity

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